

See 4012 Marina & Lee

A Couple The Oswalds Really Admired

BY BARBARA STANTON
Free Press Staff Writer

MARINA AND LEE, by Priscilla Johnson McMillan. (Harper & Row, \$15).

In 1953, the author of "Marina and Lee" was a Harvard Russian studies graduate who had just signed on to work for young Sen. John F. Kennedy. Six years later she was a correspondent in Moscow, interviewing a young ex-Marine who had just defected to the USSR.

By the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963, she was back in Harvard Square, one of a milling crowd of shocked and weeping people asking each other who could have killed the president. His name is Lee Harvey Oswald, a friend reported. "My god," said Priscilla McMillan. "I know that boy."

Because she had known both victim and assassin, and because she was haunted by the question of why, Ms. McMillan set out to reconstruct the life and mind of Lee Oswald. There was another reason for her quest. She had been much struck by Jack Kennedy's charm, his fatalism, and his unflagging curiosity. She thought he would want to know why, too.

"I could see him meeting Oswald somewhere and peppering him with questions," she writes. "What put it into your head? Was it something about me personally or did you do it out of principle? ... He would not have had the slightest malice, only that astonishing curiosity."

"MARINA AND LEE" is a fascinating story, based on documents, interviews, Warren Commission files and the retrospective counsel of psychoanalysts, but most of all on long, probing talks with Marina Oswald in 1964, when her recollections of life with Lee were still woundingly fresh.

Disaffected American boy, rebellious Soviet girl, they shared remarkable similarities. Like Lee, Marina never knew her father and resented her mother, suffered an unhappy childhood and carried deep feelings of rejection into adulthood.

She married Oswald six weeks after they met in Minsk, where she was a pharmacist and he was a metalworker in a radio and television factory. All her life, Marina had felt "different," marked for something other than the drab repressiveness of Russian life; marrying an American confirmed her as somebody special. Later she found Oswald married her to spite a girl who had just jilted him.

Oswald suffered from the reading disability known as dyslexia, which frustrated him in school, but he had a high opinion of himself and liked to talk about "ideology." He thought of himself as an intellectual. New acquaintances were at first impressed by the range of his vocabulary, then disgusted or bored by the paucity of his ideas. One summed him up as "a semi-educated hillbilly."

Back in America, Oswald beat his wife; Marina goaded him. Their sex life was satisfactory, except for his tendency to premature ejaculation and her taunts that he could never learn to kiss like her last boyfriend, Tolya.

Both Oswalds admired the Kennedy family. Lee approved of the president's commitment to racial justice, among other things, and felt an affinity for the Kennedys because Jackie was pregnant at the same time as Marina. Marina thought Jack Kennedy was sexy; he reminded her of Tolya.

Lee refused to let Marina learn English, as a means of keeping her isolated and under his thumb; bright as she was, Marina could have learned on her own but she believed she somehow deserved all the rotten treatment she got. He sponged off her friends, rudely. She begged him to say that he loved her.

What a pair they made. Their story reads almost like that longtime staple feature of the Ladies' Home Journal, "Can This Marriage Be Saved?" The tale is saved by the skill of the author and the reader's foreknowledge that before the last page, this immature, bullying, pseudo-intellectual little runt is going to go out and kill the president of the United States.

ALMOST BACKHANDEDLY, the book sweeps away any lingering idea that Oswald could have been a cog in a wider conspiracy, a tool of the CIA or the KGB. No intelligence agency in the world would have trusted such a paranoid, unreliable, short-fused misfit with a mission to the corner mailbox. Oswald couldn't take orders and was contemptuous of everyone he ever associated with. He was arrogant and secretive, a braggart and a coward. He lied reflexively about things that didn't even matter.

Why did he kill Kennedy? Because — and this is a glib summary that does justice neither to the author's insight nor her research — he was the classic misfit and loner, an insignificant and powerless being who wanted to have people recognize the great man he fantasized himself to be.

Because John Kennedy, whom Oswald much admired, symbolized both the father who abandoned him and the monstrous mother who destroyed him, and because the president carried about him an aura of death like a magnetic field.

Because all during that fateful fall of 1963, events combined to push an emotionally unstable Oswald over the brink, to drive him to commit the one heroic deed that would capture the world's attention, and give him the forum to explain to us all how he wanted to achieve the perfect society.

Lee Harvey Oswald believed all men but himself to be fools; he was going to help us, in his own perverse, mad way. At the very moment when his fragile hold on reality was about to snap, chance brought John F. Kennedy into his orbit, in easy rifle range of the Texas School Book Depository. Aside from the enormity, it was too bad, in the most ironic way. Because Oswald liked Kennedy. He really did.